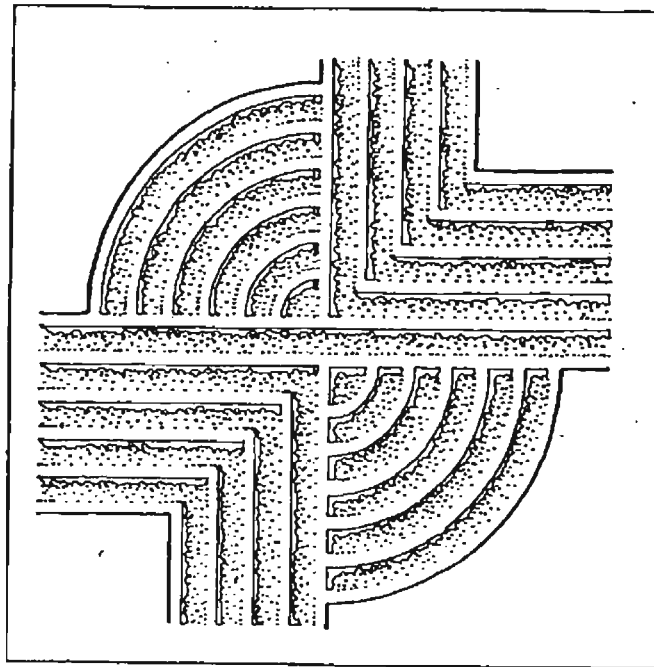


# ASSESSMENT OF DAMAGE TO THE MEEKINS FAMILY CEMETERY, MARLBORO COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA



## RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 92

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**THE DESECRATION OF GOD'S ACRE:  
ASSESSMENT OF DAMAGE TO THE MEEKINS FAMILY CEMETERY,  
MARLBORO COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA**

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**This report is printed on permanent recycled paper**

## Introduction

Mr. James Meekins of Latta, South Carolina contacted Dr. Michael Trinkley, Director of Chicora Foundation on August 28, 1992 at the suggestion of Mrs. Virginia Fowler of the Bennettsville Historical Society. Mr. Meekins was concerned about the severe damage of the Meekins family cemetery, located on South Carolina Secondary Road 23 (Hebron-Dunbar Road) and options for the proper restoration of the cemetery (Figure 1).

While doing family research, Mr. James Meekins and Mr. Herbert Meekins interviewed Mr. Paul Welch who had grown up in the Dunbar area. Mr. Welch was familiar with the Meekins name and told them where the family cemetery was located. He remembered that when his children were young, he would take them by there. He also remembered that some of the bricks on the vaults were caving in and the skeletons in the vaults were visible. He stated that a short time ago he and his wife went to look for the cemetery and were only able to find the headstone of Christian McRae Meekins, who died in 1848. The cemetery had been badly disturbed by heavy machinery (interview with Mr. James Meekins, September 11, 1992; interview with Mr. Paul Welch, September 14, 1992).

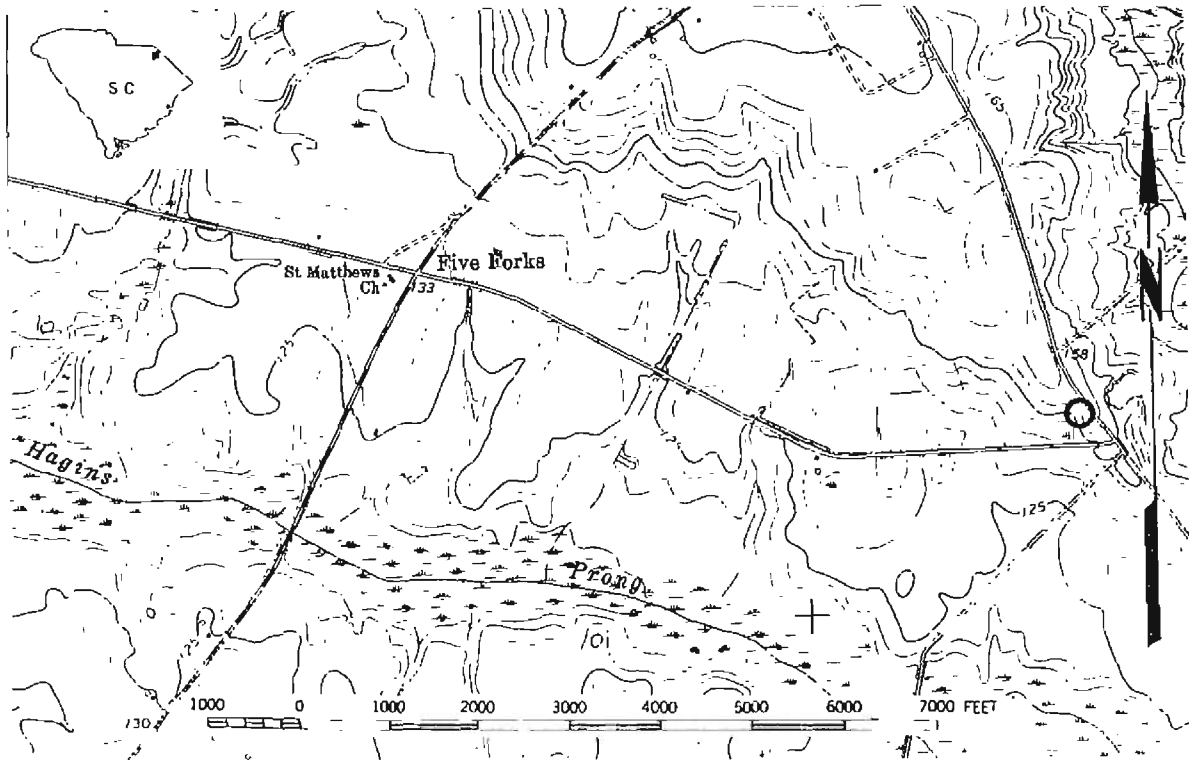


Figure 1. Location of the Meekins Cemetery on the 1972 Clio Quadrangle map.

Mr. Meekins followed Mr. Welch's direction and found the cemetery. After examining the damage, it appeared that the cemetery had been covered with about 1.0 to 1.5 feet of fill dirt. Deep tire ruts, some possible ditching, crushed brick from the vaults, and displaced tombstones indicated that heavy machinery had driven over the site. At that point Mr. James Meekins called the sheriff and the land owner, Mrs. Wanda Stanton. Mrs. Stanton and her caretaker Mr. James Graham then visited the site, unaware that the damage had occurred.

By clearing some of the fill away, Mr. James Meekins found several pieces of headstones, one of which was found in the ditch of Secondary Road 23. One stone that he was able to piece together measured approximately three by five feet in size.

After better understanding the damage, he contacted Mr. Mike Knight of Carolina Power and Light (C.P. & L.), which has a powerline right of way through the area. Mr. Knight visited the site and stated that he did not believe that the damage had been caused by his company, but agreed to visit the site again when more of the overburden had been removed. Mr. Meekins later interviewed a C.P. & L. employee, Mr. Jim Collins, who said he had been mowing the area of the cemetery since about 1978. Mr. Meekins reports that Mr. Collins indicated that the mowing was likely the cause of considerable damage to the stones and vaults. He also stated that State Forestry had dug some fire breaks there a couple of years ago because of a forest fire. This is supported by evidence of ditching behind the major portion of the cemetery as well as evidence that some ditching occurred closer to the road, over the cemetery.

Mr. Meekins then contacted the S.C. Department of Highways and Public Transportation since it appeared to him that the road had destroyed several graves. Mr. Dale Stewart, Resident Maintenance Engineer for Marlboro County met him at the site. Mr. Meekins told Mr. Stewart that he had been told by a local informant that the highway department had used the cemetery as a turn-around during a resurfacing episode about 14 years ago. According to Mr. Meekins, Mr. Stewart refused to admit that there was a cemetery there. He further stated that the highway department had right of way there and they had no way of knowing if there was a cemetery or not. Mr. Meekins differed saying that the equipment operators had been informed by a local, but did nothing with the information.

Mr. Meekins continued his clean-up efforts and photographed and plotted head stone pieces as he found them. The discovery of head stone fragments, stacked one on top of another and covered with fill suggests that whoever damaged the cemetery also attempted to hide the extent of the impact. During clean up Mr. Meekins discovered that small trees and brush were pushed down, and covered with dirt. Upon further cleaning he discovered that a number of trees, upward of 3 inches in diameter, had been laid down on the sites and 1 to 2 feet of fill added over them. He has also noticed that after heavy rains, some of the graves appear to be sinking.

Before clearing further, he decided to consult with Chicora Foundation in hopes that we could offer suggestions as to what other actions should be taken. As a public, non-profit heritage organization, Chicora Foundation agreed to visit the site to assess its current condition and give suggestions for clean-up and protection.

#### Field Investigations

On September 11, 1992 Ms. Natalie Adams of Chicora Foundation visited the Meekins family cemetery with Mr. James Meekins. Mr. Meekins had cleared the overburden from the central portion of the posited cemetery and cleared away some of the brick rubble from what appeared to be disturbed vaults. In addition, he had plotted the locations of tombstone fragments with wooden stakes. The original ground surface of the cemetery is approximately a foot above the road surface.

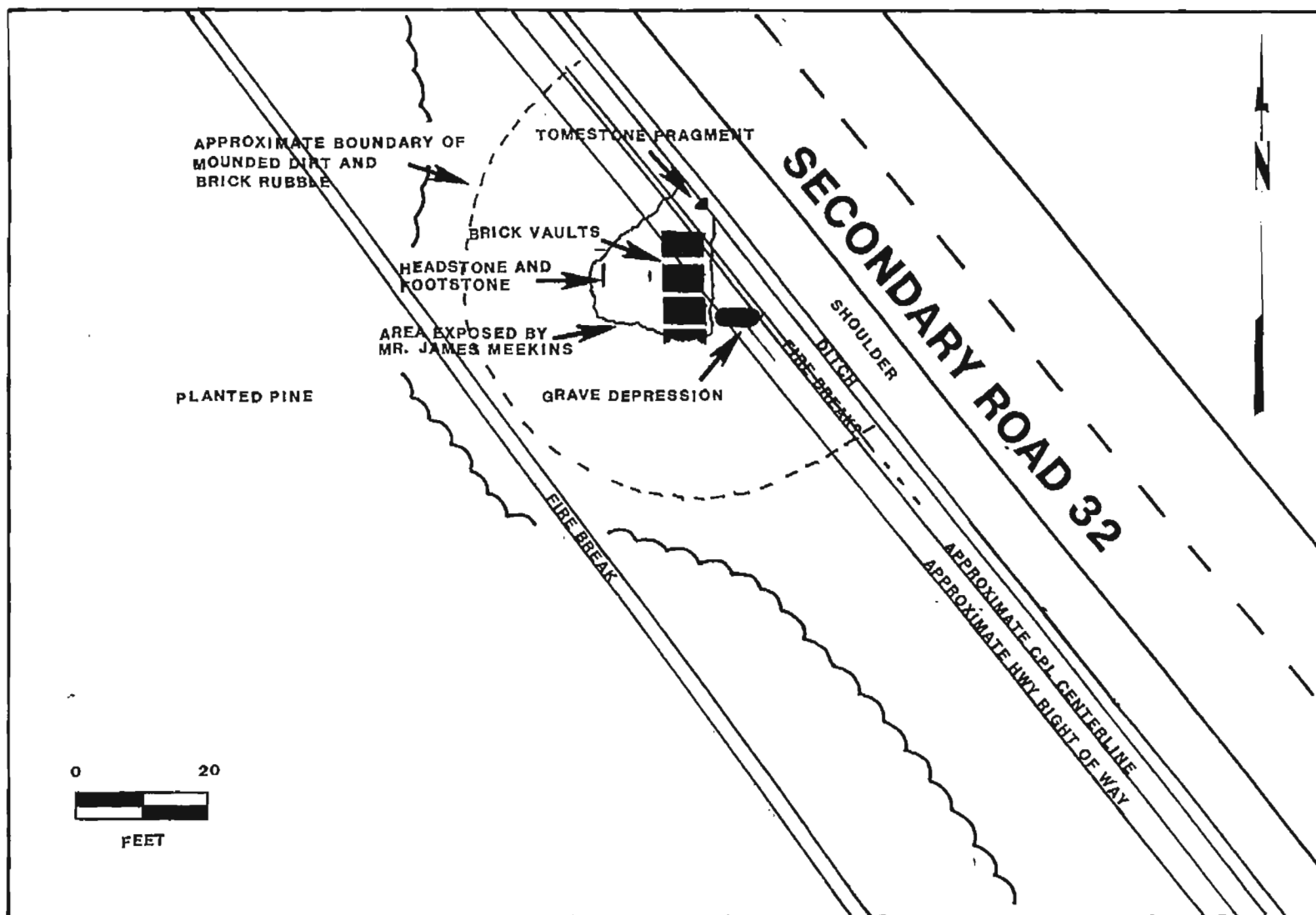


Figure 2. Approximate location of features associated with the Meekins cemetery.

Initial walk over of the area indicated that the overburden covers an area from the ditch to an area of planted pines approximately 75 feet to the west. To the north and south, planted pines extend closer to the road area, and it is possible that they mark the boundaries of the cemetery. From the planted pines looking toward Secondary Road 23, the overburden can be easily seen. It appears that this fill only covers the cemetery area, since further south near Five Forks Road overburden is not obvious. Our best estimate is that at least 2 feet of fill is present over much of the cemetery, although we have not undertaken any excavations, and this is based only on a visual examination and the work that has been conducted by Mr. Meekins. Some evidence of ditching can also be seen along the edge of the planted pines, and another probable ditch can be seen along the road edge (Figure 2).

This investigation revealed that Mr. Meekins had found three side by side brick vaults and it appears that more are present, based on dense concentrations of brick rubble in other areas of the cemetery. One un-vaulted grave associated with Christian Meekins was found just west of the vaults. The markers consist of a broken headstone and a slightly displaced footstone. To the south and east of the vaults is a depression, oriented east-west as the other graves are. All or part of the cemetery had been surrounded by a wrought iron fence, and small sections of the fence were found during Mr. Meekins initial clean up efforts. There is also evidence that at least one or two graves (and possibly more) have been heavily impacted by the cutting of the road ditch adjacent to Secondary Road 23.

During this visit, Mr. Sonny Smith stopped at the cemetery. He stated that several locals have been selling off the brick from the cemetery. This suggests that a lot of brick has already been removed. The removal of brick may be the cause of several of the graves sinking.

There can be no doubt that this area represents a small, family cemetery. As such it is afforded the protection of the Code of Laws of South Carolina, § 16-17-600, relating to the destruction of graves. Specifically, this law makes the damage or destruction of human remains a felony, with anyone convicted subject to imprisonment of not less than one year or more than 10 years and a fine of not more than two thousand dollars. In addition, this section specifies that defacing, vandalizing, injuring, or removing a gravestone or other memorial marker; or vandalizing or damaging a cemetery, graveyard, or grave is a misdemeanor, with anyone convicted subject to imprisonment of not more than 10 years and a fine of not more than two thousand dollars.

There is evidence that the contents of at least several graves have been damaged or destroyed by the ditching operations. It is also possible that graves have been damaged by efforts to contain a recent fire. Stones and other markers have been damaged through a combination of forces, including the periodic clearing of the area. We have been unable to account for the source of the large amount of spoil which has been placed on the cemetery, or to explain why this fill was placed here (other than to hide the impact to the cemetery).

#### Map Research and Land Use History

Records and maps of Secondary Road 23 construction and maintenance were consulted to determine if the cemetery had been noted by surveyors and maintenance personnel. The 1958 plans for secondary road 23 (Docket Number 35.306) were very vague. The only landmarks shown on the S.C. Highway 381 to the Dillon County line portion of the plans were S.C. Highway 381 and Secondary Road 32. No other roads, structures, cemeteries, or other features were identified. Land owners names were, however, printed on the maps.

Conversations with various highway department personnel indicated that maintenance records were not kept. The Resident Maintenance Engineer, Mr. Dale Stewart, was contacted, who stated that neither the District nor the county maintenance office keep maintenance records.

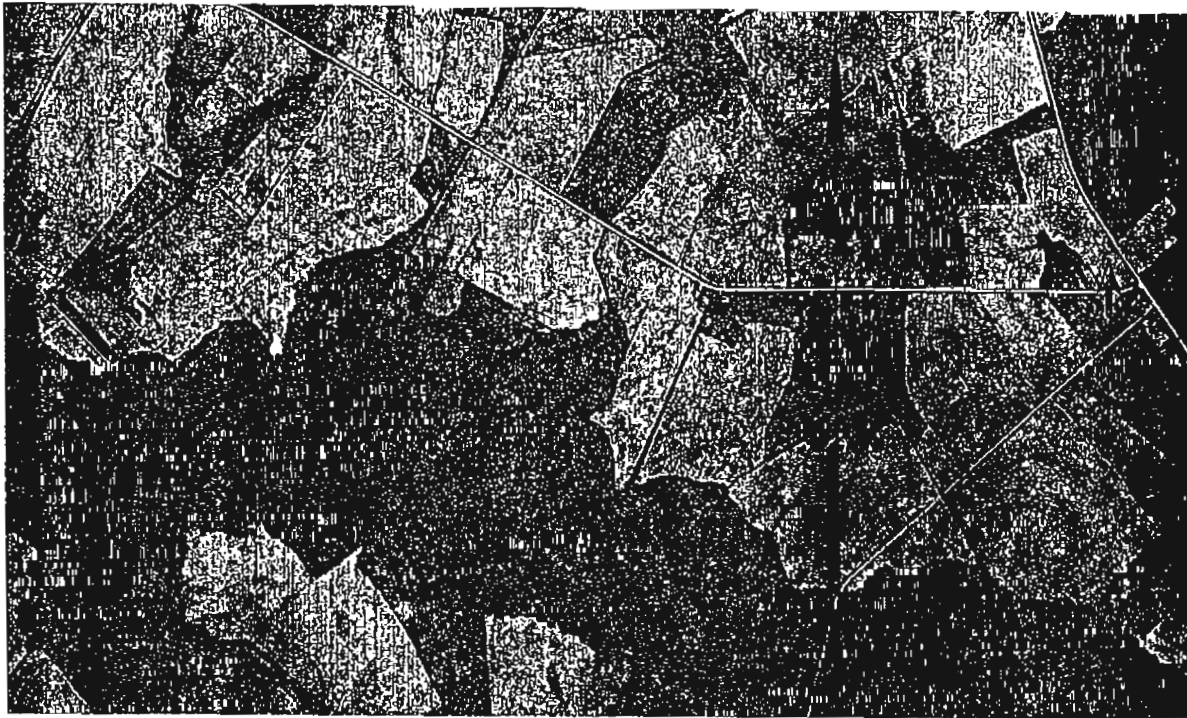


Figure 3. 1949 aerial photograph of the cemetery area.



Figure 4. 1964 aerial photograph of the cemetery area.

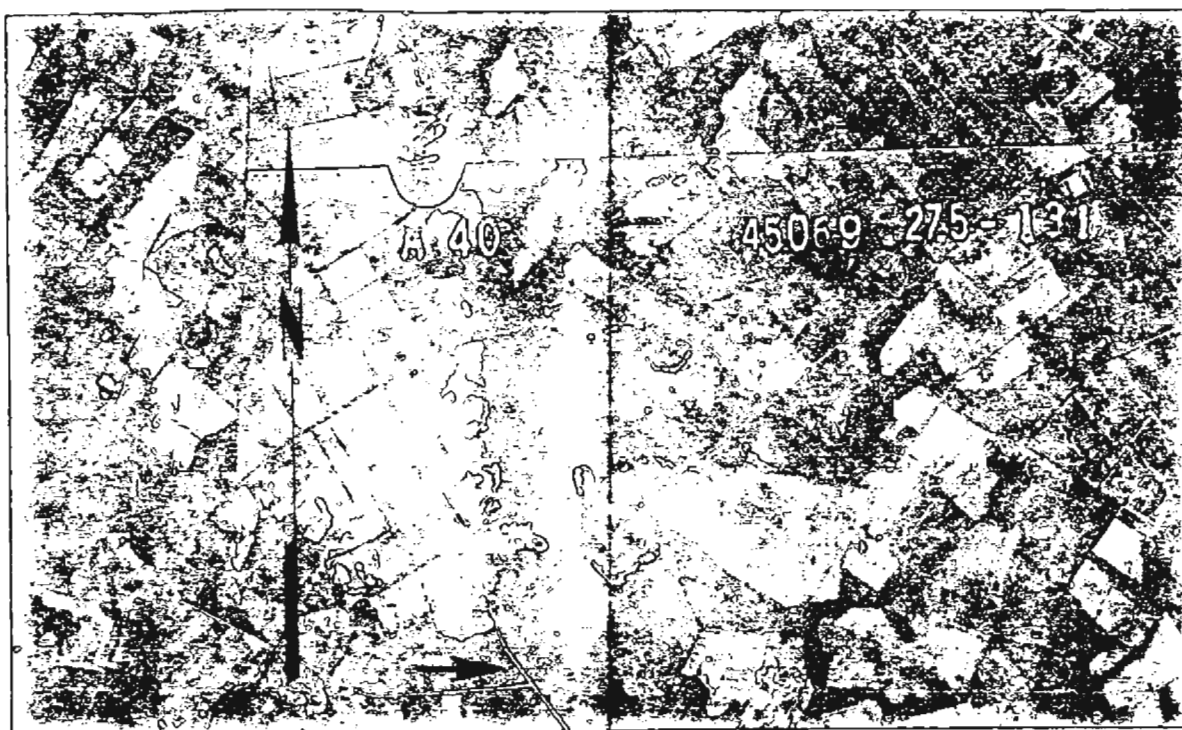


Figure 5. 1975 aerial photograph of the cemetery area.

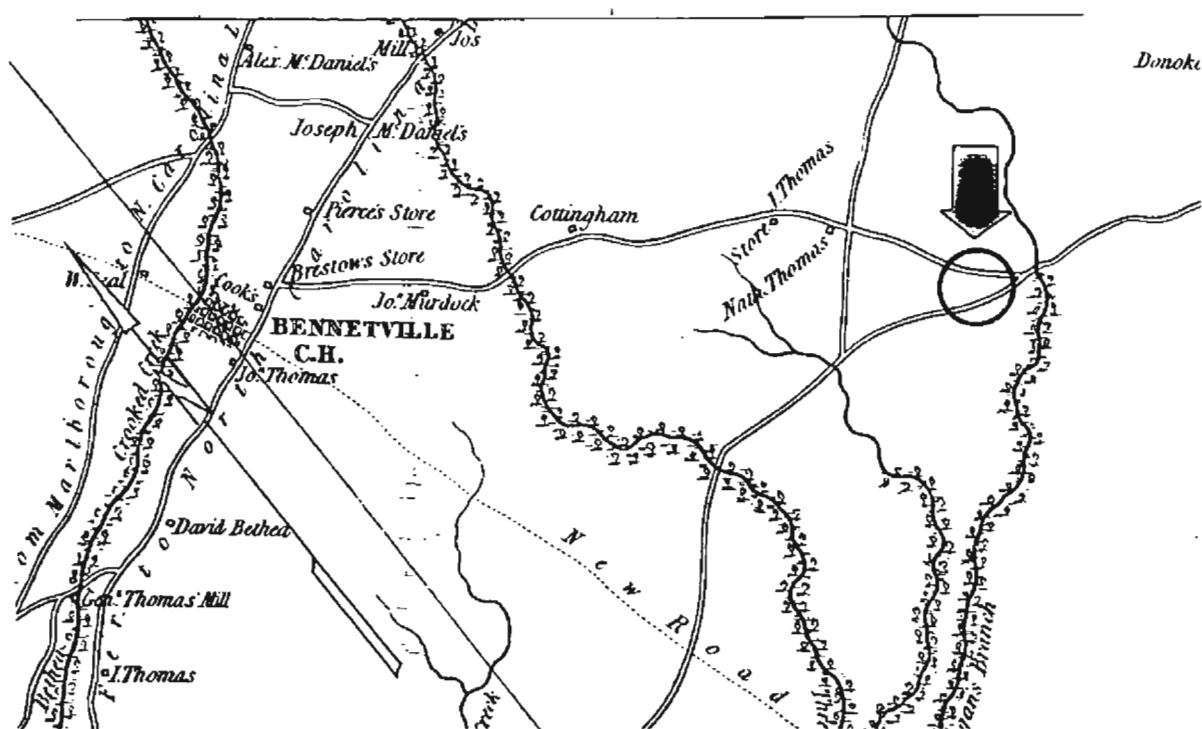


Figure 6. Mills Atlas showing the area in the 1820s.



A 1917 soil survey map does not show the cemetery, nor does the 1972 USGS topographic map. However, a series of aerial photographs give indication of the cemetery's location and changing land use patterns. A 1949 aerial photograph shows the area in fields. The cemetery appears as a small clump of trees at the edge of Secondary Road 23 (Figure 3). The 1964 soil survey aerial photograph shows virtually no change in land use. Again, a small clump of vegetation can be seen in the area of the cemetery (Figure 4). Approximately ten years later, the area of the cemetery is shown as wooded (Figure 5), and today the area behind the cemetery is planted pine.

Mr. Meekins believes that the following individuals were buried in the cemetery:

1. Jnop Meekins, died late eighteenth century
2. Wife of Jnop Meekins, possibly the earliest grave
3. Jonathan Meekins, 1730-1831
4. Drady Meekins, d. 1842
5. Aaron Meekins, d. 1841
6. Thomas Meekins, d. 1848
7. Janet Meekins, d. 1861
8. Margaret Meekins, d. 1857
9. Lydia Meekins, d. 1867
10. Sam McColl, d. 1865
11. Mary Meekins, d. 1862
12. Jonathan Meekins, d. 1865
13. Ann Meekins, d. 1853
14. Christian Meekins, d. 1848
15. Mary D. Meekins, d. 1887
16. Enoch John Meekins, d. 1877
17. John Purnell, died 1860
18. Eli Meekins, d. 1904
19. J. Medlin, d. 1861
20. Lydia Meekins Spears, d. ?
21. James Spears, d. ?

It is possible that historic plats, wills, or other documents may provide additional information about the cemetery. While these sources have not yet been examined, they should receive a high priority. The files of the Marlboro County Clerk of Court, Marlboro County Probate Court, and the S.C. Department of Archives and History should be examined.

## Results and Conclusions

### Recordation

The Meekins family cemetery has been assigned site number 38ML213. The central UTM coordinates are E630880 N382360 and the soils are somewhat excessively drained Eustis sands. Presently, the size of the cemetery is not known, but based on preliminary indications (location of planted pines) it may be as large as 100 by 100 feet.

Based on the orientation and location of tombstone fragments, brick rubble, and known graves, it appears that road, ditch, and firebreak construction have disturbed the cemetery area. In addition, with C.P. & L.'s right of way through the cemetery, it is possible that the area was further disturbed by mowing. Clearing the overburden off of the cemetery will assist in better understanding the partial destruction of the site.

## Mitigation of the Site

The first step for the recovery of the information remaining at the Meekins Cemetery is the removal of fill. Thusfar Mr. Meekins has conducted this work himself, carefully noting the location of all brick concentrations and tomb stone fragments. While Marlboro County has offered to assist in cutting and removing brush, they indicate they cannot help remove the spoil from the site.

It is essential that all work be conducted by hand. Unskilled workers must be carefully supervised to avoid additional damage to either the graves or the stones. The spoil should be removed from the cemetery once it is certain that no stone fragments or portions of the original iron fence have been missed. It is also important to recover as many bricks as possible from the vaults. These bricks should be securely stored until such time as the vaults can be repaired. The bricks should not be allowed to remain on-site since they are being scavenged. Likewise, all fragments of the gravestones and iron fence should be secured off-site until they are repaired and ready to be re-installed.

The exact locations of all stones should be noted, with particular attention paid to in situ stones and portions of the iron fence -- both of which can be used to determine the limits of the cemetery. Eventually it will be helpful to have the services of a surveyor and it may be that the County Engineer can offer some additional assistance in this area.

Once the spoil is removed, downed vegetation should be cut by hand and should also be removed from the site. The area can be raked by hand and fire rakes are particularly useful for this. Vegetation and loose soil in grave and vault depressions may be carefully removed, but no excavations should be undertaken. It is preferable to leave the cemetery in a slightly rough or "ragged" state then to further damage the archaeological integrity of the site. It may be useful to remove all vegetation from the site to prevent damage to the graves and stones from the trees, and also to eliminate the need for C.P. & L. to use heavy equipment in clearing their right-of-way. Once the vegetation is removed and the area raked, a draught resistance grass or wildflower mix could be established on the site.

The boundaries of the cemetery can best be established by taking all of the various lines of evidence together -- locations of graves, location of grave stones, location of fence fragments, location of spoil, and location of the original wooded area. While archaeological methods can be used to more precisely determine the location of graves, it is more appropriate and less expensive for the boundaries to be mutually agreed to by the property owner and family members. Once these boundaries have been established two mechanisms are appropriate to help prevent future damage. The first is to clearly mark the location of the cemetery with a fence. The second is to request the property owner recognize the existence of the cemetery in the deed for the property. It may be possible, in Marlboro County, to have the cemetery property struck off the tax roles.

## Conservation of Grave Stones

There are a number of fragmentary stones already recovered from the cemetery and there will likely be additional stones found as work progresses. The first requirement, previously mentioned, is that all fragments, regardless of their size, be retained. The second requirement, also mentioned earlier, is that the location of all stone fragments be carefully recorded prior to their removal to a secure location. Stones which are still in situ should be left in place and not removed from the site.

Stone conservation is a delicate, and technical field. It is not something that can be properly done by untrained individuals or local stone masons, even if they offer "restoration" services. No efforts should be made to clean the recovered stones or to mend them. The only trained conservator in South Carolina with the expertise to undertake the treatment and repair of the stones being

recovered from the Meekins Cemetery is Ms. Lynette Strangstad of Stone Faces in Charleston, South Carolina. Strangstad has published a useful primer on cemetery preservation that should be consulted for additional information (Strangstad 1988).

It is also essential that once these stones have been treated and placed back in the cemetery they are not again damaged through road maintenance, powerline easement work, or through the construction of fire lanes. While it may seem that a clearly marked cemetery would be safe from such acts, the current investigations suggest this is not the case.

#### Conservation of the Iron Fence

If sufficiently large fragments of iron fence are recovered during mitigation of the cemetery, it is likely they will require conservation treatment as well. Lacking such treatment the metal will continue to spall and deteriorate -- the corrosion process commonly known as "rusting." The classic methods of protecting metal involve covering the object with a protective coating. Often this may be a phosphoric or proprietary compound. A new conservation technique is the use of volatile corrosion inhibitors or VCIs. These compounds condition the air with trace amounts of the corrosion inhibitors, frequently mixed with amine salts, to provide a protective effect. Chicora Foundation has been using several VCIs produced by Cortec Corporation of St. Paul, Minnesota. The products being examined are essentially non-toxic, easy to apply, durable, and non-polluting. Most importantly, it appears that the Cortec products are reversible. Early results on other items have been promising and Chicora Foundation is willing to test treat several fragments of the metal fence.

#### Summary

Secondary Road 23 has a long history. While the initial date of construction is unknown, the present road closely follows the alignment of a road shown on Mills' Atlas from the 1820s (Figure 6). Some disturbance to the cemetery could have occurred during the 1958 improvements. The 33 foot right-of-way on either side of the center line puts the S.C. Department of Highways and Public Transportation boundary through the cemetery. It is likely that ditch construction for road drainage damaged several graves. Future cleaning and maintenance of these ditches will continue this destructive process.

Other damage may have occurred through the construction of fire breaks. This damage would have had to occurred sometime in the last twenty-five years, since the surrounding land was in fields before then. Mowing with heavy equipment by C.P. & L. may have continued to damage the site.

Mr. Paul Welch remembers the cemetery before the 1958 improvement of Secondary Road 32. Although somewhat decayed, tombstones and vaults were still standing and the cemetery was clearly recognizable. Mr. Welch moved fifteen miles away before the road work was conducted and did not frequent the area after that. He does believe, however, that the road alignment changed slightly, although this is not documented by the highway plans. Regardless, the cemetery has been extensively damaged in the 34 years following the improvements to Secondary Road 23.

Although, several parties may have unintentionally damaged the cemetery over the past 25 years, it is clear that the majority of the damage was intentional -- the organized stacking of broken tombstone fragments and the bringing in of one to one and one half feet of fill -- and was conducted within the last year. While many people may dismiss the loss of the Meekins Cemetery as "unfortunate," local efforts should be intensified to determine the parties responsible for the damage to this cemetery. It is likewise appropriate for the S.C. State Historic Preservation Office and the S.C. State Archaeologist to diligently pursue the damage to the cemetery.

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